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"Empowering Our Ministry: Who Is the Holy Spirit?"
Acts 1:1-11

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In 1963, a spiritual awakening began to take hold in a congregation in the Los Angeles area, in a very affluent community known as Bel Air. The congregation had already been growing through a program based on commitment to Jesus Christ, the discipline of studying and obeying the word of God, and training lay leadership for group study and prayer. The Holy Spirit taught these people the basic element of love in an unexpected way as the people responded by moving out to their friends in a ministry of evangelism and healing.

Along the way, these representatives of the 'frozen chosen,' these Presbyterians, discovered the teaching of 1 Corinthians 12 about the exercise of varied spiritual gifts to build up the body of Christ. They began to witness new fruit of love and joy with gifts ranging from service and teaching to healings, prophecy and tongues. Their senior pastor at the time, a man who became quite well known over the years, a godly man by the name of Louis Evans, explained to his people that "We came to discover that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are not like a box of strawberries. We do not pick and choose the ones we want. Rather we submit ourselves to God, then He provides the gifts of the Holy Spirit which we need."

In trying to understand this power of God which is ours to use, if we would learn how to ask wisely, we will have to maneuver a road that has been made much more difficult by those who have traveled this way before. There are obstacles in this road. There are abandoned vehicles and blown tires and people waving wildly for us to take a particular detour. In a way, it's comical. But there is a way through and, oddly enough, it involves staying on the road and following the Roadmap, the Bible, which God gave to us for this purpose.

You've heard the phrase 'the means to an end.' It's no where more applicable than in this area of spiritual awakening, of tapping the power of God that God wants us to tap, so that His church will be built. So many people focus on the means and forget about the end. The church in Corinth had this problem. They were given the power of God and misused this power to devolve into factions. They were given gifts of the Holy Spirit (as we all are) and used these gifts to dominate one another. They forgot, as many forget today, that the power of God or the gifts of the Holy Spirit are simply means to the end of building Christ's church. The end is to have the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. The end is to have ripening fruit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

I received a letter just the other day from a woman who lives near the lunatic fringe of spiritual renewal. She is a local area pastor who wrote that God told her to start a church and then told her to write the other pastors in Vacaville to get us to give her money so she can build a church building. Along the way she quoted a passage from Isaiah 45 which, she alleges, shows

God telling us to demand things of Him, that the undiscovered truth is that God is a servant waiting around for us to demand things. Now, I thought this was a bit odd. In three years of graduate seminary and twenty years of ministry I hadn't heard about this concept. So I looked up the passage in Isaiah and, of course, it said no such thing. Not even close. It actually goes the other way. I mention it only because it's so recent.

I could go back a few years to the Rev. Jim Jones and the people he led to Guyana. Or to the traditionally Pentecostal churches in our country that insist that God always gives the spiritual gift of tongues to every believer who experiences what they call 'the baptism of the Holy Spirit' even though there's no Biblical warrant for saying this. Not even close. It actually goes the other way. Or to other extreme, those churches in our country who are known by an artificial overlay imposed upon the Bible known as Dispensationalism; these people say that gifts like tongues and prophecy never exist today and that churches who get involved with such gifts are following the Devil, even though there's no Biblical warrant for saying this. Not even close. It actually goes the other way.

It gets so confusing that many churches, and most Presbyterian churches, just opt out of the whole thing and move on with what they can understand. And that's precisely the frustrating part for me, because when we opt out, we stop moving our bus down the road. So we're not going to do that anymore. We're not going to let the Pentecostals or the Dispensationalists or the spiritual lunatic fringe define the ground or replace a perfectly workable Roadmap with their odd detour directions. We're not going to let them set the agenda because we want to focus on the end, not the means. We'll talk about the gifts of the Holy Spirit along the way, but not before we talk about the Holy Spirit.

So, who is the Holy Spirit? Well, the first thing is to say that the Holy Spirit is the third person in the trinity. The trinity is composed of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Not three gods, just one, with three persons. In and of itself, the trinity is a hard concept. I brought an egg to a children's sermon a few months ago, telling the kids that you don't have an egg without a shell, without the white part and without the yoke. You can use each part for a different purpose but everyone understands that a chicken egg is shell and white and yoke. And, frankly, that's the best theological definition of the trinity I've ever heard. So, the first thing to say is that the Holy Spirit is God, and so there's no reason not to pray to the Holy Spirit.

The second thing to say is that there is a great deal of ambiguity about the nature of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is described as water that will bring forth life in the wilderness, or that will flow out from us in rives of living water. He comes upon Jesus in the form of a dove, and when He came upon the first disciples He came as fire, and as a mighty rushing wind.

In our own experience He is felt sometimes as electricity that charges through our bodies, making us tingle all over. He comes upon us sometimes as a rush of warm love that knocks us off our feet and lays us out on the floor. He lifts us up in praise, and sets our feet to dancing, as He did with King David. Sometimes He comes as heat that brings healing, or a strange power that makes our hands shake, or releases our tongues to speaking unknown languages. Sometimes He comes as silence, a deep palatable silence that brings us to our knees in awe before the unfathomable mystery.

One Presbyterian pastor tells about an experience at the last night of a retreat where people were coming forward for prayer. Suddenly the Holy Spirit tremendously fell upon a young pastor, overcoming him with bubbling heavenly joy. He fell to the ground in fits of drunken laughter. The older pastor, telling of this event, related that he had seen this phenomena before, but

then it seemed out of place. The older pastor knew there were a number of stiff Presbyterian types at this meeting, and was concerned that this might not be 'decent and in order' and someone might get offended. So the older man went over to calm down the laughter. But as he drew close, he relates it was as if he had stepped into a river of swirling, sparkling, living water. He found himself also picked up and there erupted from within the depths of his soul a joy so exuberant that he also broke forth in laughter. He found he couldn't stand up, that he too seemed to be carried in a tide, so he just stayed on the floor with the younger man and engaged in hilarious laughter, as the rest of the retreat looked on. The older pastor said that the best he can describe it is that Jesus was there and in His presence there was an overwhelming sense of joy.

We can certainly say that God the Father and God the Son are divine persons with will and intentions that know and love us. We have clear images of Jesus embracing the little children, or of God the Father speaking face to face with Moses. But the Holy Spirit often seems vague, and is described or experienced in equally vague terms like fire, wind, and water, all of which have no specific form and are impersonal. So the tendency is to think of the Spirit as an inanimate being - a form of spiritual power that emanates from God, as heat and light emanate from the sun above.

The reason why we need to start with talking about the personhood and divinity of the Holy Spirit is this: If you think of the Holy Spirit, as so many, even among Christian people, do today, as a mere influence or power, then your thought will constantly be, 'How can I get hold of the Holy Spirit and use it?' But if you think of Him in the Biblical way, as a person of divine majesty and glory, you're thought will be, 'How can the Holy Spirit get hold of me and use me?'

The first understanding of getting and using the Holy Spirit is the way of spiritual pride, and the precondition for abusing the Spirit's gifts and power. It's the way to the sin of Simon the magician in Acts 8. It's the way of witchcraft and spiritualism. It's what's going on in one of the most popular movies of the day: Star Wars: The Phantom Menace. The notion in Star Wars is that there exists something called the 'force,' an impersonal power that's accessible for powerful personal use if you happen to have a goodly supply of midiclorans in your body. I don't recall midiclorans being mentioned in the Bible, and of course they're not. The 'force' is simply one more way our culture seeks to depersonalize and dominate spiritual power. But the second understanding, the right way, is not to see the Holy Spirit as something I can use, but to recognize the Holy Spirit as Almighty God, in whose presence we can only bow down and say, 'mold me, melt me, use me' according to Your high and holy purposes.

You see, it's all about knowing God, loving God, being in the presence of God. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are a means to an end. The gifts are important, very important, but they're not the point. The point is to use those gifts to join in the building of God's church. That's why Jesus responded the way He did in our passage today from Acts 1, saying, "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth." In other words, we can't do the church thing successfully without the Holy Spirit. So, Jesus leaves, He ascends to the Father, and within a short period of time, the promised Holy Spirit comes, to be 'God with us' (Emmanu-el) as we build the church.

We can speak about four main areas that cover the work of the Holy Spirit. First, the Holy Spirit has the job of bringing people to salvation. It's the Holy Spirit who gets inside us and brings us to the place where we acknowledge Christ as Lord. It's the story of Nicodemus in John 3, the story of being born-again by the Spirit. The Scripture teaches that God has no grandchildren --- everybody has to come to Jesus on their own, and for every person who comes, the Holy Spirit is behind the

desire.

The second job of the Holy Spirit is sanctification, of making us godly people. The first praise song this morning, Step by Step, is an excellent example of sanctification. Sanctification is a process that takes our whole lives. Anybody who tells you that you can be holy once and for all is out there on the spiritual lunatic fringe. I once knew a small group of people who were part of a movement that believed that they 'had victory in Christ' and because of that so-called victory, they were living sinless lives. They were whacko. They were overcome with pride, and were out there on the fringe.

2 Corinthians 3 says: '… where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom … and we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into His likeness from one degree of glory to another.' One degree to another degree. That's sanctification, the lifelong process where we daily, hourly, submit ourselves to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and are changed into godly people in thought, word, and deed. [Walk out among congregation and ask people when they became a Christian, and are they yet perfect? Why not?] You know how it works. Two steps forward, one step back. The Holy Spirit is a gentleman. He doesn't force Himself on us. He accepts the fact that we take back the Lordship of our lives now and then. And that's why sanctification takes our whole life. Learning how to trust God wholly, and how to love God utterly, takes time.

The third job of the Holy Spirit is empowerment. He gives us the juice we need to run our engines. He is the Hoover Dam that provides us power to light our homes and run our businesses. When Jesus ascended to the Father, His disciples were told to wait, to stay in the city and wait, until they be 'clothed with power from on high' (Luke 24). Without the Holy Spirit the church wouldn't have the capacity to build Christ's church, and it's the not asking for this power, in the past, which has prompted me to say what I'm beginning to say here.

And the fourth job of the Holy Spirit, oh yes, the fourth job, is to build koinonia. K-O-I-N-O-N-I-A. Roughly translated, it means 'community' or 'fellowship.' But it's more than that. It's bearing one another's burdens. It's recognizing that there's 'one body and one Spirit' (Ephesians 4), and that what we do with each other (and to each other) reflects on the Person we worship. It's getting the body of Christ that is CPC to work as a healthy, functioning human body, with every human part doing its job, each arm and each leg and each joint, so that we grow not just numerically but in love. Koinonia is found in the song that says they (the world outside) will know we (the church inside) are Christians BY our love for each other inside. Thus the purpose of the Holy Spirit is always to build up the body.

The Holy Spirit is the Lord God Almighty. He is an eager co-participant in the building of Christ's church that is called CPC. Do you want to have an active relationship with Him? Then talk to Him. He's right here.

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